

WINGS OF THE JAPANESE NAVY

By WILHELM SCHULZE



The last few months have proved that the Anglo-American powers have, to their own detriment, tremendously underrated the fighting power of Japan, the strength of her morale and her arms as well as the ability of her military leadership. That which was underrated most and therefore caused the greatest sensation in the course of the war up to now was the air arm of the Japanese Navy. From the first moment, when the war broke out over Pearl Harbor, and throughout the following months, it has won a long row of successes which were devastating to the fighting power and the prestige of the Allies. It is an irony of fate that it was Great Britain and the United States themselves who, above all during the Washington Conference in 1922, drove Japan to this development.

We have asked Wilhelm Schulze, veteran journalist and Tokyo correspondent of the "Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung," to write the following article on the origin and growth of the Japanese naval air arm.—K.M.

WHEN ON December 8, 1941, together with the news of the outbreak of the War of Greater East Asia, the first reports about the Japanese victory in Hawaii were sent out over the ether, many readers may for a moment have doubted the correctness of these reports. The deed was so bold, the success so great, that there were no previous examples to which one could have compared the event. The last doubts, however, were removed through a repetition of this victory, the devastating blow against the British warships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* two days later, and through the admission of the British defeat by Churchill. Since then scores of individual actions as well as a number of great Japanese victories over the American-British-Dutch fleets have again and again shown the world the overwhelming strength of the Japanese naval airmen. In them Japan possesses a weapon which will not only deeply influence but may even decide the outcome of the war.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

The bearer of these sensational successes, the Japanese Naval Air Force, recently

celebrated the thirtieth year of its existence. It was founded in 1912, one year after the Army Air Force, by two Japanese officers who had returned from lengthy studies in France and America. They established the first Navy flying school at Oppama, near the naval port of Yokosuka. It was not considered very important at the time, as can be seen by the fact that in ten years' work it received barely six million yen in funds. It was not paid serious attention until 1922, when a British air mission, headed by Captain Sennville, was summoned to Japan to reorganize training methods. Not until 1927 did the Navy Ministry create a department for "Naval Flying," which then, however, took determined charge of the development.

This development was dictated to the Japanese Navy heads by the British and Americans at the Washington Conference in 1922 through the ill-famed 5:5:3 stipulation. In limiting the Japanese battleship force to three fifths of those of England and America, they forced the Japanese to turn their attention to unlimited defense possibilities in other

spheres, as, for instance, that of naval airplanes. The development was hastened by the fact that two battle cruisers under construction, the *Akagi* and *Amagi*, could, by agreement with England and America and following their example, be converted into airplane carriers. Instead of the *Amagi*, which was destroyed in the great earthquake of 1923 before completion, the battleship *Kaga* was later converted into an airplane carrier. The *Akagi*, completed in 1927, the *Kaga*, placed in service in 1928, and an older and smaller aircraft carrier, the *Hosho*, formed the nucleus of the Japanese naval air arm, which has now made such a sensational appearance in the Greater East Asia War.

THEY TOOK A CHANCE

It should be emphasized here that, according to recent statements made by responsible admirals, the leaders of the Japanese Navy were soon to recognize the possibility of overcoming the inferiority in numbers and tonnage as compared with the British and Americans by better material, superior training, and the utmost concentration on unlimited weapons. All expert comments since Hawaii reveal unequivocally that, since the Washington Naval Agreement, the training of the Japanese naval fliers has been undertaken with a determination and severity which indicate that the Japanese naval heads were aware of holding a trump card. Other naval leaders could still discuss the relative merits of battleships and aircraft. For the Japanese naval leaders it was enough to see a possibility for the superiority of aircraft to direct their main attention towards this possibility. Of course, the general public did not hear anything of these considerations. At international discussions, Japan gave not the slightest indication that she conceded the naval air arm a good chance in the fight against naval vessels. To all outward appearances Japan continued, like all other naval powers, to place battleships, cruisers, and submarines in the foreground.

As an example of the severity of the training of Japanese naval airmen, it

was recently reported that, after they had received their basic training, they were only rarely given an opportunity to take off in good weather. In a press interview, one of the fathers of Japanese naval aviation, Rear Admiral Matsunaga, gave an account of how severe this training really was, emphasizing that only through a most intensive training lasting twenty years could the achievements of the last six months be won. According to him the training is as follows.

BEARDLESS YOUTHS

Japanese naval fliers are all recruited from volunteers, who must not be less than fifteen or more than seventeen years old on entering the service. So when Matsunaga speaks of the flying heroes, he tenderly uses the expression "beardless youths," indicating by this that the active pilots of Japanese naval aircraft are all little over twenty years old. The first three years of their schooling are devoted to technical matters like navigation, instruments, knowledge of motors, and general theory of flight. Not until the fourth year do they start actual flight training. In the fifth year they learn stunt and night flying, in the sixth landings, and in the seventh starting from airplane carriers. Only at the end of the eighth year does the flying pupil become a full pilot.

Matsunaga recounted that in 1921, when the first aircraft carrier was placed in service, there was only a single Japanese pilot who was able to make a smooth landing on deck, and that it cost *eight thousand* attempts to make two more pilots absolutely sure. He told of the difficulties in taking off with a full bomb load from the short runway of a carrier, and added with a shrug that not a few flying pupils lose their lives before they pass their final tests. In this connection he formulated the classic sentence that in the first year of their training the recruits are filled with the ardent desire to die for their country (which, with the Japanese attitude towards life and death, must be taken literally), but that in the second and following years they are gradually and firmly educated not to die

until they have destroyed the enemy. One result of this training is the willingness of Japanese naval fliers to destroy themselves if they are sure of thereby destroying the enemy.

THE EQUIPMENT

This training is the first pillar of the Japanese successes in war; the equipment placed in the hands of trained pilots represents the second pillar. The Army Air Force and the Naval Air Force, founded separately, have also developed their machines quite separately. Of course, there has always been a general exchange of experience. In the very beginning both branches had to depend on foreign models. But with its entirely different requirements, Japan's aviation as a whole has moved away from foreign patterns and followed its own paths, just as her Army aviation has diverged from her Navy aviation. Today a purely Japanese development is to be found in both branches, and the traces of former co-operation with other countries on the basis of license agreements have disappeared almost entirely. The events of the last few months have shown what a high standard the Japanese planes have reached.

In spite of frequent descriptions and photographs published in the Japanese press with the permission of the Japanese Navy, a secret surrounds the important details of the types of aircraft used by the Japanese Naval Air Force. It should be remembered that one of the reasons for the Japanese successes was that all important information had been kept secret. The same strict secrecy is warranted regarding the inner organization of the Japanese Naval Air Force. Japanese public year-books indicate that the Naval Air Force is divided up into a number of air regiments, which are combined into air corps and air brigades. But since the outbreak of the China conflict and the abrogation of the British and American naval treaties, no details have been published about the number of these regiments, brigades, and corps or about the number of planes belonging to each formation.

UNKNOWN LEADERS

Of course, the same is true also of the command of the Naval Air Force, where the Japanese do not even publish the names of leading personalities. The careers of leading admirals, as far as they have been published in *Who's Who*, reveal that every superior naval officer, every fleet commander, has at one time been connected with the Naval Air Force, has shared the responsibility for its training, and is himself trained to lead it. At the present time we must limit ourselves to the statement that the coastal air formations, equipped mainly with land planes, are placed under the command of the various naval stations, while those attached to the fleet are under the command of the respective fleet commanders. Therefore the victories of the Japanese Naval Air Force in Hawaii and at Kuantan have been credited directly to Admiral Yamamoto, the Commander in Chief of the combined Japanese fleets. Incidentally, Admiral Yamamoto, who was the first training officer of the Japanese Naval Air Force, also has a just claim to be called its father.

The influence of geography on warfare is particularly apparent in the air arm. For Germany, enclosed by the narrow North Sea and Baltic Sea, airplane carriers were not only forbidden at first but also impracticable, since they would have been too easily exposed to enemy bombing attacks and too limited in their field of action. Japan did not have to consider such things in building her fleet. Her geographical position and the vastness of her possible future battlefield pointed logically to exploiting the idea of airplane carriers. Therefore Japan, according to the Japanese *Far East Year-book 1941* (page 106), possessed six aircraft carriers of altogether approximately 90,000 tons and five seaplane tenders.

During the last few months the world has been learning with amazement how these ships and the planes belonging to them have been able to influence the war situation in the Pacific after the danger of American and British battleships had been banished through their first daring attacks.